

Sitting comfortably?

The reason that rattan features in so many memorable 20th-century images is because not only is it easy on the eye, but it also has an informality that instantly puts people at ease. Lulu Lytle, co-founder of Soane Britain and author of a new book on the subject, explains its enduring appeal





COMFORT has always been one of the most cherished attributes of furniture made from rattan: 'It has been thought inadvisable to have one of the famous Dryad chairs in the editorial offices of *The Aeroplane*, lest visitors might be tempted to stay too long to the detriment of the daily routine,' wrote the editor of *The Aeroplane* magazine in 1916.

The slender-stemmed vinous palm native to South-East Asia has proved its versatility for centuries, a quality it demonstrated via its contribution to the war effort. Dryad, the leading British rattan workshop of the day, shifted production from rattan chairs, tables and loungers to items required for the First World War, including baskets for observation balloons, stretchers for wounded soldiers and shell and ammunition casings.

I am not sure exactly when my obsession started, but, by my early twenties, I had built quite a collection of rattan, including tables, baskets, chairs and undefinable oddities. Quite why I fell under its spell is also hard to pin down, but I follow a long list of enthusiasts about whom I have been learning more as I have researched this beguiling and versatile material. It is deceptively strong and extraordinarily flexible, qualities that have been maximised by craftsmen for centuries, drawing on its inherent malleability to give life to almost any stylistic interpretation. Rattan falls under the umbrella of 'wicker', which is not a plant, but a general term for the product of the craft of weaving natural fibres including willow, rush and rattan.

The easygoing atmosphere created by wicker furnishings has been appreciated for a long time. It was during the long reign of Queen Victoria that rattan furniture ➤

Left: Cold comfort: Churchill, Truman and Stalin at the Potsdam Conference, 1945.

Below: A trolley from Dryad's vast catalogue



was first produced specifically for the British and European markets, initially in the Far East. It became a familiar sight on lawns and terraces, in conservatories and other less formal areas of the home. At a time when prolonged stints overseas in the military or colonial administration were commonplace, many of rattan's early devotees would have experienced its practicalities firsthand; lightweight, hygienic (bugs could not linger as they could in upholstered furniture) and delightfully exotic, rattan and willow furniture grew in popularity as the century progressed.

From the late 19th century, rattan chairs were a common studio prop both for photographers and artists. Often asymmetrical and sometimes highly ornate, they served as a focal point around which to arrange groups posing for formal portraits, as well as individuals whom the photographer was keen to put at their ease. British society and fashion photographer Cecil Beaton was a particular fan. At Reddish, the 16th-century Wiltshire house where he lived from 1947 until his death, the conservatory or winter garden was filled with antique rattan. Beaton understood only too well how his charming chairs created a relaxed yet theatrical backdrop for portraits, most notably of Marilyn Monroe sitting on a white rattan Peacock chair, and brought his passion for the material to an American audience in 1956 when he designed the sets for the Broadway musical *My Fair Lady*.



Above: Even a young Prince Charles could move a rattan recliner. **Below:** Mrs Sanders and Mr Russell after a ride in the desert during the Cairo 'season' in the 1920s

6 Matisse, Sargent, Lavery and Renoir are among artists who favoured rattan chairs for their portraits

The peacock chair, with its high curved back forming a flattering halo-like frame for the face, became widely adopted as a photographic backdrop. There is hardly a filmstar or luminary that hasn't posed in one, from Elizabeth Taylor to John F. Kennedy. Some might be familiar with the peacock chair's rather risqué revival in the 1970s, thanks to its appearance on the advertising poster for the French soft-porn film *Emmanuelle*.

On a less frivolous level, Matisse, Sargent, Lavery and Renoir are among a serious roll call of artists who favoured rattan and wicker chairs for their portraits. American artist William Merritt Chase painted many fashionable East Coast women from his New York studio, where he kept a variety of wicker chairs for sittings. You will be hard pressed to find a single photo of people looking anything other than entirely at ease in the presence of rattan furniture. For more than a century, the chairs have been deployed to put sitters at their ease in potentially strained ➤



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The Robin Hood chair by Dryad, a Leicester firm founded by Harry Hardy Peach in 1907

situations; it is no accident that substantial rattan chairs were chosen for the meeting of Churchill, Truman and Stalin at the Potsdam Conference in 1945.

Rattan furniture is synonymous with heat, pleasure and languid summer days, in both the glamorous lifestyles captured by the likes of Slim Aarons and Horst P. Horst and the more modest playgrounds of less polished holiday resorts. Taste-makers of the past 60 years, such as Marella Agnelli, Truman Capote and Hubert Givenchy, have revelled in rattan's unique ability to lighten the atmosphere of the grandest architecture, humanising even the most austere setting. Portrait photographer Lisa Sheridan deployed rattan to great effect in many of her charming images of the Royal Family, taken between 1936 and 1965, in the grounds of Windsor Castle. The carefree informality of the scenes was

unprecedented and Sheridan is credited with having ushered in a more intimate and unstaged approach to royal portraiture.

In the first half of the 20th century, the most glamorous aeroplanes, yachts and trains incorporated rattan in their interiors, with British firm Dryad thriving in this market. Co-founded in Leicester in 1907, the company quickly established a reputation for superbly made, original designs, exported all over the world. Grand Duke Alexander of Russia was among the first clients to order an Abundance armchair in Dryad's inaugural year and his brother-in-law Czar Nicholas II commissioned British-made rattan furniture for the lavishly decorated Russian imperial yacht *Standart*, which, when it came into service in 1896, was the largest royal yacht in the world. A decade later, the White Star Line employed Dryad to make rattan

furnishings for upper decks and restaurants including the glamorous Café Parisien aboard *Titanic*. Fiat is still making its fabulous Fiat 500 Jolly with woven rattan seats.

In its laid-back, easy-going way, rattan furniture draws 'Good times'. Its associations with fusty, over-elaborate Victorian interiors have well and truly overturned, thanks to architects and designers who have recently breathed new life into the way rattan is incorporated or placed centre stage in entirely modern interiors, making a space feel young and fresh. When properly made, it becomes even lovelier with use, adding an intangible atmosphere and elegance to any room and to gardens, where people are unnecessarily squeamish about using it. My enduring love of rattan turns to despair at the sight of *faux*-rattan furniture, which I fear can kill the atmosphere of the loveliest gardens and terraces stone dead with its soulless uniformity, defeating the whole point of this most beautiful and charming of natural materials. 🐘



Lulu Lytle and the rattan renaissance

Since Lulu Lytle co-founded Soane Britain in 1997, with the aim of creating new furniture with the quality and longevity of antiques, she has championed the cause of traditional British craftsmanship. Soane's commitment to British manufacturing led to the acquisition, in 2011, of England's last surviving rattan-weaving workshop in Thurmaston near Leicester. Miss Lytle has subsequently worked with its team of craftspeople to use rattan in the creation of a wide range of designs, some traditional, others highly innovative. Her new book, *Rattan: A World of Elegance and Charm*, published by Rizzoli (£50), is the result of extensive research into the history

of rattan design and manufacture around the world.

